

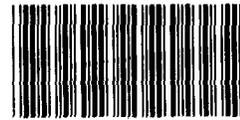
GAO

Report to the Chairman, Committee on
Post Office and Civil Service, House of
Representatives

April 1990

1990 CENSUS

Enhanced Oversight
Should Strengthen
Recruitment Program



141258



United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

General Government Division

B-238315

April 13, 1990

The Honorable William D. Ford
Chairman, Committee on Post Office
and Civil Service
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This report responds to the request that you forwarded from the former Chairman and Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Census and Population, House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, that we monitor census personnel issues. The report focuses on the Bureau's recruitment efforts during the 1989 development of its urban address list.

We are sending copies of this report to other appropriate congressional committees; the Secretary of Commerce; the Director, Bureau of the Census; and the Director, Office of Management and Budget. Copies will also be made available to other interested parties upon request.

The other major contributors to this report are listed in the appendix. If you have any questions concerning this report, please contact me on 275-8676.

Sincerely yours,

L. Nye Stevens
Director, Government Business
Operations Issues

Executive Summary

Purpose

Hiring and retaining the 390,000 temporary employees needed to complete the 1990 census is a major management challenge for the Bureau of the Census. A high quality workforce is important to ensuring the success of the Nation's most comprehensive data-gathering project. Peak census employment will occur from April to June with some hiring continuing until September to complete critical census operations.

The Chairman, House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, requested that GAO monitor census personnel issues. This report focuses on:

- the progress the Bureau's district offices have made in recruiting temporary employees and
- the adequacy of the preparations the Bureau has undertaken to ensure that its district offices are ready to implement a recruitment program for the census.

Background

The Bureau's 13 regional census centers are responsible for monitoring and guiding work in the district offices. For 1989 field activities, the Bureau opened 109 of the 458 district offices it will use to do the census. Precanvass, the Bureau's development of its mailing list for urban areas and the 1989 field activity with the largest workload and staff needs, involved canvassing urban areas to check the accuracy and completeness of address lists the Bureau purchased from commercial vendors.

Results in Brief

Almost one-half of the Bureau's district offices were unable to meet the 1989 recruiting goal of four applicants for every field position during prec canvass. According to the Bureau, meeting recruiting goals is important in providing management with the flexibility to select candidates who will effectively complete their assignments. The Bureau generally was able to overcome its recruiting difficulties and finish prec canvass on time. However, staff shortages in some offices led to delays in completing prec canvass, increased costs, and forced changes in the Bureau's staffing procedures.

Problems meeting 1989 recruiting goals also raise concerns about the Bureau's ability to attract sufficient staff in 1990. Staffing shortages may result in 1990 because applicants may be less willing to accept jobs that require a far higher degree of public contact than prec canvass. Staff shortages during the census could contribute to delays in completing

fieldwork and lead the Bureau to alter census procedures, as occurred in 1980, which could affect the quality of the census.

The Bureau confronts a number of obstacles in attracting staff, such as the temporary nature of census jobs, but has made progress in developing a recruitment program. Additional recruiter training is needed, however, on how to manage a major recruitment effort. Local planning also needs to better address the diverse demographic and economic challenges facing the Bureau, such as how to compete in high-employment areas. The Bureau's regions are taking actions to address these problems, but headquarters needs to ensure that improvements will be made sufficiently and consistently.

Principal Findings

Many Offices Had Recruitment Difficulties but Still Finished on Time

Nationwide, 46.8 percent of the Bureau's district offices had not met the Bureau's recruiting goal of four qualified applicants for each position by the time prec canvass began. A large applicant pool provides managers with discretion in choosing the best candidates and also enables them to replace employees who are not meeting production requirements.

Most offices were able to overcome their recruiting difficulties during the 1989 prec canvass and hire sufficient staff to finish on time. However, staff shortages were the major reason that about 14 percent, or 15 of the 109 district offices, finished prec canvass at least a week behind schedule. Staff shortages in some offices during prec canvass also led the Bureau to alter its goals and move staff between offices to complete work. The Bureau believes local census takers are important, especially early in a field activity, to increase the public acceptance of the census and thereby increase the accuracy of census data. Finally, staff shortages contributed to increased cost. Eleven of the 15 offices that completed prec canvass late exceeded their budgets by an average of about 25 percent. (See pp. 12 through 19.)

Recruiting Difficulties During Precanvass Raise Concerns for 1990

Recruiting problems have shown the Bureau that in many areas, as many as six or eight applicants for each position may be needed to ensure sufficient staff. Turnover and job refusal are expected to be high during the census because the census requires public contact to gather data.

The Bureau faces a number of obstacles in recruiting, such as the degree of interaction with the public required by census jobs; the short-term nature of census employment; and high crime rates, which may make applicants fearful of working in some neighborhoods. Well-designed recruitment programs cannot guarantee that the Bureau will have sufficient staff, but they are important in minimizing the effects of these obstacles. In addition, other factors that were not available for pre-cavass, including the Bureau's geographic wages and the high level of publicity that accompanies a decennial census, should help recruitment during the census. (See pp. 19 through 24.)

Improved Recruiter Training and Recruitment Planning Needed for the Census

Limited recruiter training and planning contributed to the uneven success of the Bureau's 1989 recruitment efforts. The Bureau found that recruiters needed training on planning, managing, and monitoring a major recruitment effort.

The Bureau has taken actions to overcome these limitations with its 1989 recruitment program. For example, Bureau officials said they hired individuals with stronger management abilities for the remaining district offices and directed the regions to expand recruiter training. The regions also are enhancing the recruitment planning for the district offices.

Bureau headquarters is not systematically reviewing regional recruitment efforts to ensure that recruiters are receiving the needed training and planning support. Bureau headquarters reviews weekly reports that show the extent to which offices have met recruiting goals. These reports however, do not document the reasons offices are having recruiting problems. GAO agrees with the Bureau that its regions are in the best position to design their own recruitment programs. However, the Bureau could review regional training and recruitment plans developed for the district offices to ensure that they adequately cover key issues. (See pp. 24 through 30.)

Recommendation

GAO recommends that the Director, Bureau of the Census, direct headquarters staff to assume a more proactive role in monitoring the regions' management of field recruitment efforts by

- assuring that the recruiter training the regions are providing addresses the limitations identified during 1989, particularly in managing a recruiting effort; and

-
- reviewing the planning efforts the regions are establishing for their district offices to ensure plans account for the diverse recruiting challenges confronting the Bureau's district offices.

Agency Comments

GAO obtained oral comments on a draft of this report from the Bureau. Bureau officials agreed with GAO's recommendation but said the draft gave insufficient attention to the improvements the Bureau has made in implementing its recruitment program since the 1980 census.

GAO agrees that the Bureau has made major improvements for the 1990 census that should assist in recruiting staff. However, the Bureau's progress since 1980 does not mean that census recruiting will be without difficulty. For example, the Bureau did not meet its milestone to achieve 50 percent of its 1990 recruiting goal by March 2, 1990. Overall, the Bureau met about 34 percent of its goal by that date. According to the Bureau, almost 85 percent of its district offices did not meet the 50 percent goal.

Contents

Executive Summary		2
Chapter 1		8
Introduction	Objectives, Scope, and Methodology	10
Chapter 2		12
Recruiting Critical to Successful Census	Many Offices Did Not Meet Precanvass Recruiting Goals but Still Finished on Schedule	12
	Recruiting Difficulties During Precanvass Raise Concerns for 1990	19
Chapter 3		22
Enhanced Oversight of Field Recruitment Efforts Needed	Actions Taken to Address Recruitment Obstacles Should Help Census Staffing Efforts	23
	Recruiter Training Limited in 1989 but Improvements Made for the 1990 Census	24
	Limited Oversight Contributed to Poor Recruitment Planning	27
	Conclusion and Recommendation	30
	Agency Comments and Our Evaluation	30
Appendix	Major Contributors to This Report	34
Figures		
	Figure 1.1: Number of District Offices Opening for 1990 Activities Increasing Significantly	9
	Figure 1.2: Enumerator Staffing Will Escalate Dramatically for 1990	10
	Figure 2.1: District Offices Had Mixed Success Meeting Recruiting Goals	14
	Figure 2.2: Late Offices Experienced Significant Difficulty Meeting Recruiting Goals	16
	Figure 2.3: Some Late Offices Exceeded Precanvass Budgets	18
	Figure 2.4: Number of Applicants to Be Recruited Increases Significantly If Goals Are Expanded	19

Introduction

Acquiring and retaining the 390,000 temporary employees needed to complete the 1990 decennial census is one of the Bureau of the Census' major management challenges. Peak employment for the census will occur from April to June with some hiring continuing until September 1990. In previous decennial censuses, the Bureau's difficulties in recruiting and retaining employees in some geographic areas contributed to delays and increased costs. We have reported that the Bureau's historic difficulties in hiring and retaining temporary employees have continued during the 1990 census cycle.¹ For example, in 1988, when the Bureau developed much of the suburban and rural address list it will use in 1990, about 28 percent of the areas reported problems in meeting recruiting and staffing goals.

The Bureau completed several major field activities in 1989 related to the development of its census address list. As some of the final field activities before the actual census, these activities provided an important indication of the staffing situation the Bureau may face in 1990. The development of the Bureau's address list for urban areas, known as precanvass, comprised the largest workload and personnel requirements of the 1989 field activities. The Bureau hired census workers, known as enumerators, to canvass neighborhoods to verify the completeness and accuracy of commercial address lists it had purchased. The Bureau hired almost 20,000 enumerators to canvass 56 million households during precanvass, or more than one-half of the Nation's estimated 106 million households.

The success of precanvass is important not only in providing an accurate urban address list for 1990 but also as a key test of the Bureau's preparations to attract the large number of employees needed for the census. Recruiters in the Bureau's 13 regional census centers are responsible for designing and implementing a regional recruiting program and for guiding, assisting, and monitoring recruitment efforts in the Bureau's district offices. Each district office has a recruiter who is responsible for seeking applicants for the office's nonmanagement positions.

The 109 district offices opened for precanvass and other 1989 field activities, represented the Bureau's first attempt during the 1990 census cycle to manage work through a national network of district offices. Earlier 1990 census cycle operations, such as the 1988 dress rehearsal,

¹1990 Census: Delays in Completing the Address List for Suburban and Rural Areas (GAO/ GGD-89-74, July 1989).

either were done in limited geographic areas or were managed from the regional census centers. In 1990, the district offices will be responsible for completing the field enumeration and for hiring the hundreds of thousands of enumerators to do census fieldwork. In most cases, the entire district office management staff, like the field employees they manage, are temporary employees hired only for the 1990 census.

Precanvass was an important test but is not completely projectable to the census because the actual census will be a much more labor-intensive operation. As shown in figures 1.1 and 1.2, the Bureau is opening an additional 349 district offices, for a total of 458, to do its enumeration work in 1990. The Bureau hired almost 20,000 enumerators for precanvass in 1989. Nonresponse follow-up in 1990, during which enumerators will visit households that did not return census questionnaires, is the Bureau's most labor-intensive census activity. The Bureau projects it will need to fill about 133,000 enumerator positions for nonresponse follow-up.

Figure 1.1: Number of District Offices Opening for 1990 Activities Increasing Significantly

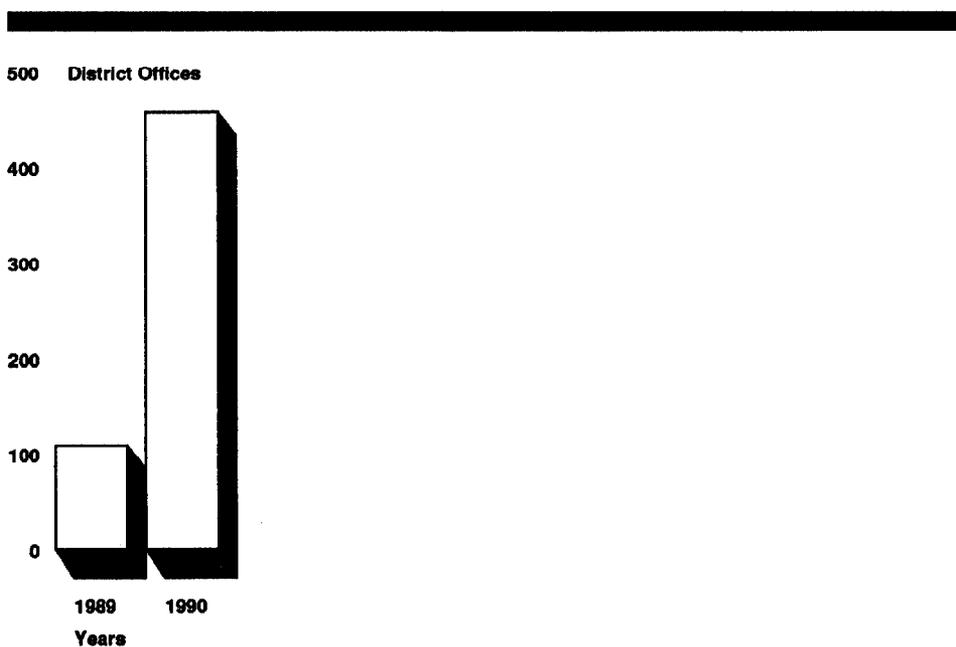
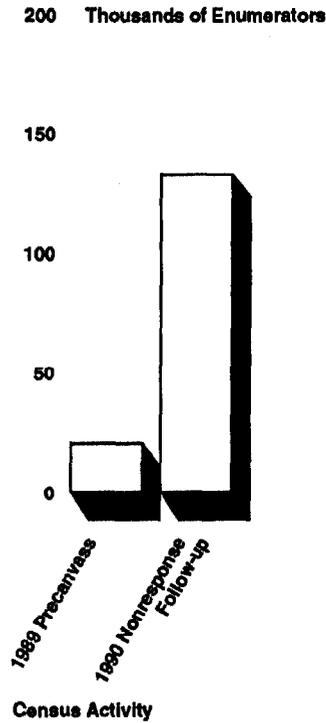


Figure 1.2: Enumerator Staffing Will Escalate Dramatically for 1990



Note: 1989 precanvass shows actual number of enumerators hired. 1990 nonresponse follow-up shows projected enumerator staffing.

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The Chairman, House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, forwarded a request by the former Chairman and Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Census and Population, House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, that we monitor census personnel issues. We used the Bureau's 1989 precanvass as a case study of the Bureau's preparations for 1990, since precanvass is one of the Bureau's last major field activities before the census. Specifically, the objectives of our work were to assess (1) the progress the Bureau's district offices made in recruiting field staff for precanvass and (2) the adequacy of the preparations the Bureau has undertaken to ensure that its district offices are ready to implement a recruitment program to attract the several hundred employees each office will need for the census.

To meet the first objective, we reviewed cost, progress, and recruitment data reflected in reports produced by the Bureau's management information system. The reports we examined are generated weekly by Bureau headquarters from information put into the system by the district offices. Bureau headquarters uses these reports to monitor and manage census field activities. These reports do not document the reasons that offices are having recruiting problems. We did not assess the reliability of the information we received from the Bureau's management information system. We also did not evaluate the validity of the recruitment goals established by the Bureau for its field activities.

To meet the second objective, we reviewed recruiting reports prepared by the regional offices, field observation reports written by headquarters staff, and personnel manuals. We also interviewed officials in Bureau headquarters and in each of the Bureau's 13 regional census centers to identify policies and procedures for recruiting temporary decennial census field employees. We reviewed historical documents and our work on the 1980 decennial census to identify the Bureau's recruiting efforts and difficulties in previous censuses.

We visited 16 district offices and two regional census centers—New York and Los Angeles—for detailed work to assess further the development and implementation of field recruitment efforts. We interviewed district office managers, assistant managers, and recruiters about their offices' experiences in recruiting in 1989 and in preparing for 1990.

These regions were selected because the Bureau anticipates that it will experience difficulties recruiting sufficient staff in parts of these regions in 1990. These regions were also selected because of their significant prec canvass workload and expected workload in 1990. The New York and Los Angeles regions accounted for about 18 percent of the planned national prec canvass workload and staff requirements. The results of our work in these regions cannot be projected to other regions.

Our work was done between June and October 1989, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. The Bureau of the Census provided oral comments on this report. These comments are presented and evaluated in chapter 3.

Recruiting Critical to Successful Census

Many of the Bureau's district offices did not reach the national recruiting goal of four qualified applicants for each position during precanvass. Despite their recruiting difficulties, most offices were able to hire a sufficient number of staff and were able to complete precanvass on time. However, staff shortages in some offices contributed to delays in completing fieldwork and changes in precanvass procedures. If staff shortages and delays are widespread during the actual census, they could affect data quality and increase costs.

The inability of many offices to meet 1989 recruiting goals raises concerns about the Bureau's ability to attract sufficient staff during the actual census, which is a much more labor-intensive activity. A successful recruiting effort is important in providing managers with flexibility to hire staff that will complete their assignments most effectively, according to the Bureau. In addition, recruiting difficulties during the actual census could result in staff shortages and delays in completing census operations, as occurred in 1980, which could impair data quality.

Many Offices Did Not Meet Precanvass Recruiting Goals but Still Finished on Schedule

To ensure that sufficient staff would be available when needed, the Bureau established a national recruiting goal for 1989 of four qualified applicants for each position at peak census activities.¹ Temporary positions generally last from a few days to several weeks. In the case of precanvass, fieldwork was scheduled to last 30 days.

Meeting recruiting goals is important in providing management with the discretion to select candidates who will complete their assignments most effectively. A large applicant pool also provides the Bureau with greater opportunity to release employees who are not meeting production requirements and replace them with more able individuals. In 1980, managers' flexibility in making hiring selections was restricted in some offices because of a limited number of applicants. The Bureau's ability to identify and select employees who will work most effectively will have an impact on the quality and cost of the 1990 census.

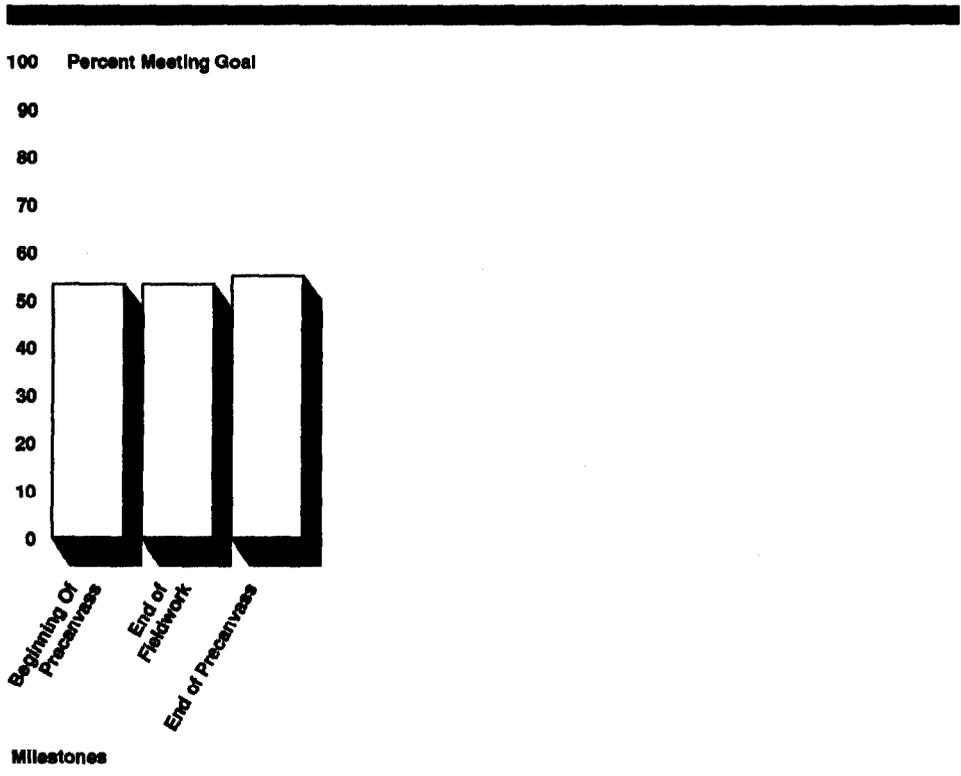
Meeting recruiting goals is also important because the Bureau has found that high employee turnover and job refusal rates require that it recruit several applicants for each position. Bureau officials said that census field activities consistently have suffered from high turnover rates.

¹The number of staff positions and thus the number of individuals to recruit is continuously adjusted during an activity on the basis of updated workload information.

Job refusal is also a problem because the Bureau must typically begin soliciting applications and testing applicants well before a field activity begins. For example, applicant testing for 1990 positions is scheduled to begin about 2 months before the jobs become available. The Bureau faces a difficult decision on when to begin testing. On the one hand, the Bureau must begin testing early to ensure that a sufficient applicant base exists when hiring begins. On the other hand, however, early testing results in many applicants either losing interest or finding other employment by the time the Bureau is ready to hire, according to Bureau officials. During prec canvass, the New York region's Northwest Brooklyn district office went through a base of 900 applicants to hire 175 prec canvass enumerators. The Los Angeles region noted that some of its district offices had to contact an average of eight applicants for each position due to high refusal rates.

Many offices nationwide were unable to meet the Bureau's recruiting goal during prec canvass. Figure 2.1 shows the extent to which district offices reported that they met recruiting goals at the beginning of prec canvass and at two prec canvass milestones—completing fieldwork and finishing all district office prec canvass activities. About 46.8 percent of the district offices reported they had not met their recruiting goal by the time prec canvass began. At none of the three points did more than 55.1 percent of the offices report meeting the goal. About 53 percent of those offices that had not met their goal when prec canvass began had less than three applicants for each position.

Figure 2.1: District Offices Had Mixed Success Meeting Recruiting Goals



Sources: Bureau Management Information System reports for May 15, June 27, and July 10, 1989. Eleven of the 109 offices did not submit data for the July 10 report.

Most district offices that did not meet recruiting goals were able to overcome their recruiting difficulties and hire enough staff to finish pre-canvass on time. Overall, 86 percent, or 94 of the 109 district offices, finished pre-canvass within at least 1 week of the scheduled dates despite problems meeting recruiting goals. The 15 offices that finished the 8-week operation at least a week late generally completed work within 2 weeks of the scheduled end of pre-canvass.²

²Fifteen offices completed pre-canvass at least 1 week late. These offices were: Jersey City, Newark, Trenton, Germantown, Norristown, Deptford, and Chester in the Philadelphia region; North Miami, South Dade, Atlanta, and Jacksonville in the Atlanta region; White Plains and Hempstead in the New York region; Worcester in the Boston region; and Oakland in the Detroit region.

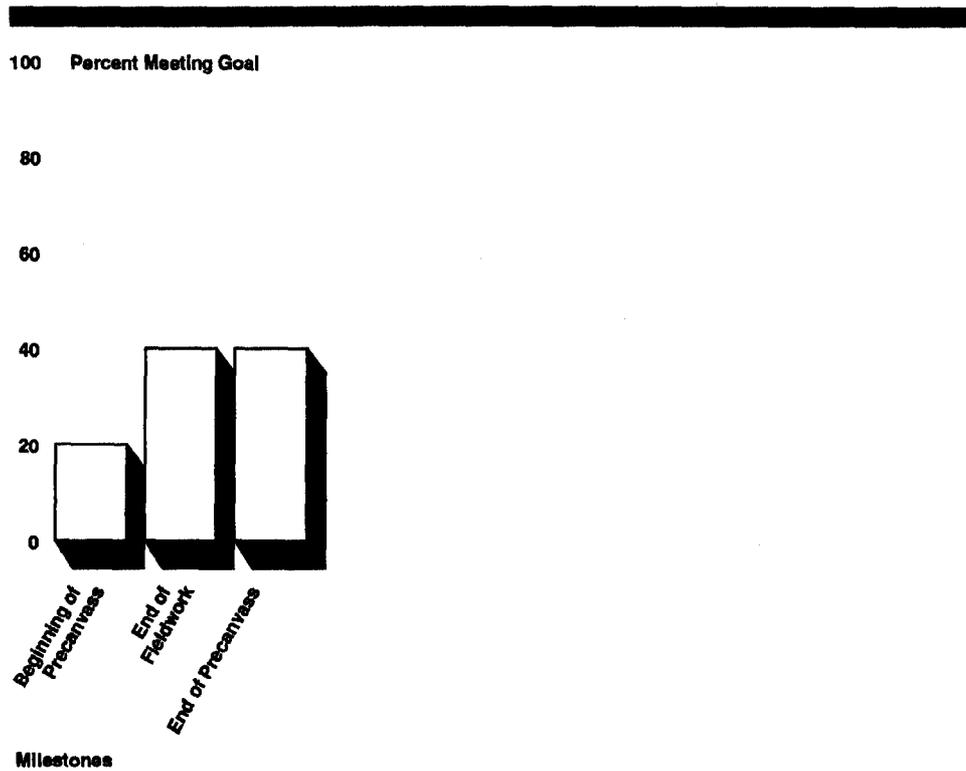
Greater than anticipated enumerator productivity was a major factor that assisted the Bureau in overcoming staff shortages and in completing prec canvass generally on time. Enumerator productivity rates nationwide averaged 10.5 percent above what had been expected. More specifically, productivity in the 35 offices that reported they had not met their recruiting goal at the scheduled end of prec canvass but still finished on time, averaged about 13 percent above expected rates.³ While higher than expected productivity helped the Bureau to overcome staff shortages and to finish prec canvass on time, the Bureau cannot be certain its productivity rates during the actual census will be higher than expected because of the basic difference between prec canvass and the census, according to the Bureau.

**Staff Shortages
Contributed to Delays in
Completing Fieldwork**

Staff shortages were a major reason that 15 offices did not complete prec canvass on schedule, according to Bureau officials. Only 3 of the 15 offices, or 20 percent, reported meeting their recruiting goal when prec canvass began compared with about 58.5 percent of the offices that completed prec canvass on time. Six of the offices, or 40 percent, that did not finish on time reported they met the recruiting goal when prec canvass was scheduled to end, as shown in figure 2.2.

³As noted in figure 2.1, 11 offices did not submit data for the management information report following the scheduled end of prec canvass.

Figure 2.2: Late Offices Experienced Significant Difficulty Meeting Recruiting Goals



Sources: Bureau Management Information System reports for May 15, June 27, and July 10, 1989.

Staff Shortages Led to Changes in Precanvass Procedures

Staff shortages in some offices during prec canvass forced the Bureau to compromise its goals of providing adequate enumerator training and hiring a local workforce. If widespread during the actual census in 1990, these compromises may reduce the quality of census data. For example, to complete fieldwork, the Bureau moved staff from district offices that had completed work into areas that were experiencing severe staff shortages. Enumerators from areas where work had been completed in the Philadelphia region were brought into the Newark and Jersey City district offices to assist with prec canvass. Enumerators were also moved in the New York region, where staff from four district offices assisted with prec canvass in White Plains. In the Los Angeles region, field staff from four district offices were used to complete prec canvass on schedule in Pasadena.

Staff shortages, which force the Bureau to use enumerators from one area to take the census in another, detract from a key census goal, especially early in a field activity, to enumerate communities with individuals who are familiar with the neighborhoods. The Bureau believes that local enumerators are important to increased public acceptance of the census and thereby improve the accuracy of census data. Using local enumerators is less important at the end of a field activity when only a few cases remain to be enumerated, according to Bureau officials. These officials said that in areas where the Bureau experiences staff shortages at the end of a field activity, moving in the best available enumerators from adjoining areas enables the Bureau to complete the remaining fieldwork quickly and with high quality.

Another change made to overcome staff shortages and complete fieldwork on schedule was to reduce the time allotted for enumerator training in some cases. For example, in two of the New York region's eight district offices—White Plains and Southeast Queens—staff shortages led managers to reduce enumerator training from 2 days to 1 to get newly hired staff working as soon as possible. White Plains did not finish prec canvass on schedule even with the reduced training.

While we did not evaluate the extent to which reduced time for training affected the quality of prec canvass in those offices, New York region district office officials believe that training should not be reduced. One suggestion made at a meeting of the assistant managers for field operations for the New York region's district offices, was to increase enumerator training from the scheduled 2 days to 3 days because many of the region's enumerators were not trained sufficiently to do the job properly.

Staffing Shortages Contributed to Increased Costs

Staff shortages and delays in completing fieldwork also contributed to increased prec canvass costs. For example, assigning enumerators to temporary duty in other district offices is costly because additional mileage and, in some cases, per diem expenses must be paid. At the Pasadena district office, the only office we visited where the information was readily available, per diem costs for enumerators moved in from other areas totaled about 6 percent of that office's field payroll costs as of August 12, 1989, or about \$13,300. Per diem expenses were also incurred for enumerators from the Trenton district office who assisted with prec canvass in other Philadelphia region district offices, according to a Bureau official. If the Bureau is forced to move staff between

offices in 1990 as it did in 1989, the costs could be much higher because of the significantly greater workload.

Staffing problems were not the only factor that caused prec canvass cost increases. However, the Bureau's preliminary data from district office cost and progress reports from when it completed prec canvass field activities show that 11 of the 15 offices that did not complete prec canvass on schedule exceeded their budgets for fieldwork, as is shown in figure 2.3. These 11 offices were an average of about 25 percent, or about \$37,800, over their prec canvass budgets.

Figure 2.3: Some Late Offices Exceeded Precanvass Budgets

15 Number of Late District Offices

10

5

0

100 and below 101-110 111-120 121-130 131-140 141-150
Percentage Range of Costs to Budget

Source: Bureau Management Information System report for August 16, 1989.

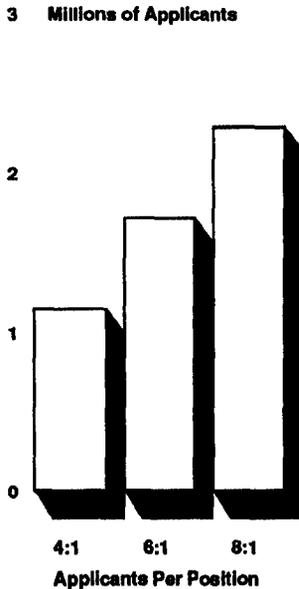
Overall, prec canvass fieldwork was completed within budget, with about 37.6 percent of the offices that finished prec canvass on time reporting that they exceeded their budgets. Greater than expected mileage reimbursement expenses and higher than expected training costs are among the factors that may have contributed to these offices exceeding their budgets, according to a Bureau official. Training costs may have been higher than expected due to a large number of part-time employees and high overtraining rates, which were revised to establish larger than

expected reserve pools of trained field staff to replace those who had quit or were released. Offices that finished on time but still exceeded their budgets averaged about 12.8 percent over budget.

Recruiting Difficulties During Precanvass Raise Concerns for 1990

Recruiting and staffing problems during precanvass and other 1989 field activities have shown the Bureau that in many parts of the country a recruiting goal of four applicants per peak operations position may be too conservative for 1990. Bureau officials now consider a recruiting goal of six or eight qualified applicants for such positions to be more appropriate in hard-to-recruit areas, such as suburban areas. We calculated, on the basis of the Bureau's projected peak 1990 staffing of 285,000 positions, how different recruiting goals, if achieved nationwide, would affect the number of applicants recruited. Figure 2.4 shows, for example, that the Bureau would need to recruit over 2.28 million applicants if a recruiting goal of eight applicants for each position is adopted.

Figure 2.4: Number of Applicants to Be Recruited Increases Significantly If Goals Are Expanded



GAO calculation based on Bureau peak staffing projection of 285,000 positions.

Higher Turnover and Job Refusal Expected During the Census

Higher than anticipated rates of turnover and job refusal occurring in part due to the significant amount of direct public contact the census requires, are major reasons the Bureau will need to recruit more candidates for each position for the actual census. Most enumerators hired in 1990 will visit households to gather information from those that have not returned a census questionnaire. Contact with a resistant public contributes to turnover and discourages potential applicants, according to Bureau officials. For prec canvass, the frequency and degree of public contact required were much less than during the census. Precanvass enumerators verified addresses and inquired whether there were additional living quarters on a property, but they did not gather the full range of census information.

One indication of the rate of job refusal the Bureau can expect in 1990 is provided by a district office manager from the Los Angeles region who estimated that two-thirds of the 1989 precanvass enumerators expressed concern about the degree of public contact during precanvass and said that it may pose a recruiting challenge for 1990.

Delays Completing Fieldwork in 1990 Could Contribute to Reduced Quality and Higher Costs

Completing fieldwork expeditiously is a key ingredient to ensuring a high-quality census. Efficient fieldwork provides time to review census counts and enables activities to be completed as planned. Timely data capture also enables the Bureau to review census counts before they are provided to the President and the states by legally mandated deadlines. In addition, the need to limit census costs and prior delays in completing fieldwork have forced the Bureau to change census plans and to reduce operations during the actual census. For example, a shortage of qualified staff in some areas in 1980 contributed to delays in finishing fieldwork. These delays, combined with the need to limit census costs, caused the Bureau to alter census follow-up procedures for households that had not returned a questionnaire and on questionnaires that were returned but were incomplete or appeared to contain errors. These changes may have adversely affected the quality of census data.

Staff shortages and delays in completing field activities in 1990 also could prove costly. The district offices will have an average budget of about \$1.6 million to complete data collection in 1990, or about 10.8 times the average amount budgeted for precanvass fieldwork. District offices' failures, in some cases, to meet precanvass budgets did not result in significant cost increases during 1989. However, if budget overruns occur in some offices in 1990 and are not accompanied by other

offices completing activities below budget, as occurred during pre-c canvass, census costs could escalate dramatically.

The Bureau was generally able to complete pre-c canvass on time despite difficulties meeting recruiting goals in many offices. However, staff shortages in some offices demonstrated the important role a successful recruitment effort has in enabling the Bureau to complete activities on time, as planned, and within budget. Achieving recruiting goals will be especially important for the actual census, which is more labor-intensive and more difficult. A well-run recruitment program is needed to attract the applicants the Bureau will require for the census. Chapter 3 discusses that while progress has been made on a number of key recruiting issues, more proactive headquarters oversight of regional recruiting efforts could further improve the Bureau's recruiting posture.

Enhanced Oversight of Field Recruitment Efforts Needed

The Bureau faces a number of obstacles in recruiting needed staff, such as the degree of interaction with the public required by census jobs; the short-term nature of census employment; high crime rates, which may make applicants fearful of working in some neighborhoods; and the absence of employee benefits for most positions—all of which make census work unattractive to many potential applicants. Although well-designed recruitment programs and thoroughly trained recruiters cannot guarantee that the Bureau will not have staffing difficulties during the census, they nonetheless are important in minimizing the effects of these obstacles. The Bureau's implementation of geographic pay rates, recent legislation that is aimed at expanding the applicant pool, and other important recruiting improvements the Bureau has made during the 1990 census cycle should assist the Bureau in attracting needed staff.

However, the district offices have not always developed the recruitment program they need to compete for staff, and some offices have lacked adequate direction, which contributed to the uneven success of the Bureau's 1989 recruitment efforts. The Bureau discussed its 1989 recruiting performance at an August 1989 conference of headquarters officials, senior regional officials responsible for the decennial census, and regional recruiters. Overall, these officials expressed a high degree of confidence in the Bureau's recruiting program and concluded that the Bureau generally is well positioned for the staffing challenges for the census. These officials also identified areas, however, where the Bureau needed to take aggressive action, such as enhanced recruitment training and strengthened local recruitment planning, to improve its recruiting posture for 1990.

Bureau officials concluded that district office recruiter training needed to be improved, particularly on how to manage a major recruitment effort and on how to plan and monitor recruiting performance. The officials also noted that local recruitment planning did not always account for the diverse demographic and economic recruiting challenges facing the Bureau, such as the need to attract applicants from all ethnic groups and the effect high-employment rates have on the Bureau's ability to attract staff. The Bureau is making improvements in its recruiting efforts for the census, but it needs to ensure that its regional offices provide the recruiter training and recruitment planning needed for the census.

Actions Taken to Address Recruitment Obstacles Should Help Census Staffing Efforts

A fundamental staffing challenge confronting the Bureau is ensuring that its pay rates are competitive. Inadequate pay is a major factor that has hampered the Bureau's recruiting efforts in some areas. For example, the Bureau raised pay in six east coast areas to meet staffing needs to complete 1988 suburban and rural address-list development activities. Pay was also increased in parts of New York and Massachusetts during prec canvass in 1989.

In a series of congressional testimonies over the last year, we encouraged the Bureau to consider a geographic pay system that is more sensitive to local market conditions to help it compete for needed staff.¹ The Bureau subsequently implemented a geographic pay program for the 1990 census that contains seven different wage levels for temporary district office staff. Pay rates for enumerators range from \$5.00 to \$8.00 per hour. Before the implementation of the geographic pay rates, the Bureau paid enumerators \$5.50 or \$6.00 per hour, except in those areas where it raised pay to address staff shortages in 1988 and 1989.

The Bureau also plans to provide supplemental payments during certain census activities to enumerators and other field staff who meet productivity goals and who continue working for a specified period of time. These payments could add the equivalent of over \$1.00 per hour to enumerators' pay.

The Bureau's geographic wage rates should make a major contribution toward enabling the Bureau to compete for employees needed for the census. However, the success of the effort depends on the extent to which the rates established for each district office are competitive and the program's funding is adequate. We currently are reviewing these issues as part of a separate effort.

The Bureau's ability to attract staff for the census was further improved by legislation that significantly expands the potential applicant pool that will be available for the census. The President signed legislation in August 1989 that eliminated certain financial disincentives for federal annuitants and military retirees to accepting census employment, by exempting them from provisions of Title 5, United States Code, that would have precluded them from receiving both their census pay and their annuity or retired pay. In testimony supporting the legislation

¹Status of Plans for the 1990 Decennial Census (GAO/T-GGD-89-20, May 5, 1989); Status of Plans for the 1990 Decennial Census: An Update (GAO/T-GGD-89-15, March 23, 1989); Status of the 1990 Decennial Census (GAO/T-GGD-88-53, Sept. 27, 1988.)

before the Subcommittee on Census and Population, House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, we noted that these retirees, who already have demonstrated a commitment to the public service, could prove a valuable source of applicants for the Bureau, especially in some of the areas where it has experienced difficulties attracting staff.²

The Bureau's recruitment efforts will also be helped by the Bureau's census promotion efforts and the large amount of publicity accompanying a decennial census, according to Bureau officials. The Bureau believes that its census promotion program and census press coverage, both of which are expected to peak shortly before the census, will inform many potential applicants who previously were not aware of the census about census employment opportunities. However, when we examined the Bureau's promotion and outreach in mid-1989, we found that the 1990 promotion effort had been hampered by a late start, duplication of effort, and strained working relationships among some Bureau units.³ In addition, the Bureau experienced staff shortages in some offices during the 1980 census even with its promotion effort and high press visibility.

Recruiter Training Limited in 1989 but Improvements Made for the 1990 Census

For 1989 activities, district office recruiters, like other district office management staff, received 1 week of training on managing the census. The management training is developed by Bureau headquarters to be read verbatim by the instructor. The Bureau directed its regions to develop and provide additional training to the recruiters. The Bureau believes, and we agree, that recruiter training should be individualized to each district office to accommodate the recruiting challenges specific to each area. Therefore, the Bureau allowed the regions to determine the amount and content of the specialized recruitment training they would offer to the district office recruiters for 1989 field activities.

Bureau headquarters did not review the regions' 1989 training programs for district office recruiters and, as a result, had limited assurance that the recruitment training the regions provided was sufficient and properly focused. While our work in the Los Angeles and New York regions cannot be projected nationally, it identified areas where recruiter training potentially needed to be strengthened. Five of the six Los Angeles region district office recruiters who received the region's specialized

²Expanding the Decennial Census Applicant Pool (GAO/T-GGD-89-22, May 23, 1989).

³Status of 1990 Census Promotion and Outreach Activities (GAO/T-GGD-89-40, Sept. 20, 1989).

recruiter training, said that it could be improved, for example, by providing answers to questions that applicants would ask most frequently, such as how employment on the census would affect welfare benefits. In the New York region, in addition to the verbatim general management training, recruiters were provided with only 2 hours of specialized recruitment training for 1989 activities. This training allowed for only a general overview of recruiting procedures.

**Training on Managing a
Recruitment Program
Needed Improvement**

The Bureau hired recruiters for the 109 district offices opened for 1989 activities largely on the basis of the applicant's familiarity with local communities, which is an important characteristic of a successful recruiter. However, the Bureau subsequently found that many of these recruiters did not have skills in planning, developing, and managing a recruitment program, which are critical characteristics of a sound recruitment effort wherever it takes place. The Bureau has since emphasized these skills in selecting district office recruiters and is confident that it was able to hire recruiters for the 349 remaining district offices who are familiar with their communities and possess management abilities. The Bureau has also decided to expand recruiter training to better ensure that its district office recruiters have the skills they need to be successful.

The significant increase in recruiting workload for the census makes it important that recruiters be effective managers. For 1990, a recruiter in a typical district office is expected to recruit at least 2,400 applicants to fill 600 positions. For prec canvass, a recruiter in an average district office needed to recruit about 525 applicants. This over four-fold increase in average workload requires that recruiters be trained to manage such a major recruiting effort, including establishing priorities, designing recruiting strategies, supervising staff who administer census employment tests and assist with recruitment, and monitoring recruiting performance.

**Expanded Training on
Using Recruiting Reports
May Be Needed**

The Bureau may also need to provide additional training to recruiters to reinforce how management reports from the Bureau's automated applicant file can assist with recruiting. The applicant file is a district office computer file containing such basic data as address, race, sex, and other information on all applicants. A primary purpose of the applicant file is to generate lists of applicants for use when the district office is ready to hire. The applicant file can also provide critical recruiting reports that show the extent to which 18 different recruiting sources, for example,

state employment offices, newspaper advertisements, and community organizations, have provided applicants. This report is discussed during census management training the recruiters and other management staff receive but as part of the discussion on using management reports, not as part of the management training section on designing and implementing a recruiting program.

Recruiters from the Los Angeles and New York regions, however, did not always use the applicant file's report on recruiting sources and in some cases did not know that it existed. For example, recruiters in two of the New York region's eight district offices said they did not know about the report. The region's recruiting plan for its district offices discusses the applicant file but does not mention the recruiting sources report.

Similar problems occurred in the Los Angeles region. A recruiter at one district office said she was not aware the report existed. Another district office recruiter from that region said his training on the use of applicant file reports was very limited and, as a result, he was not sure how to use the information contained in the report. He said that on the basis of his experience during prec canvass, he now understands how to use the report and believes it will be very helpful in 1990.

Recruiters who did not use the recruiting sources report lacked a key device for managing their recruitment program. These management reports enable recruiters to determine which recruiting sources are most successful in producing applicants and provides them with information that helps to design recruitment strategies to ensure that the workforce meets the Bureau's equal employment opportunity goals. Bureau officials said that these reports contain important information that should be used continuously throughout an operation to adjust and refine recruiting strategies.

Bureau Lacks Assurance That Recruitment Training Will Be Improved for 1990

The Bureau is addressing the problems it had with recruiter training in 1989 by requiring that the regions provide a minimum of 2 days of specialized recruitment training and 2 to 3 days of on-the-job-training in addition to the week-long census management training the recruiters receive with other district office management staff. Bureau headquarters provided general guidance to the regions on what should be included in the expanded recruitment training, such as details on census applicant testing and selection procedures.

Bureau headquarters has not required the regions to provide for review outlines of their recruiter training programs. As a result, while headquarters has provided direction on the amount and general content of recruiter training, it does not know the extent to which district office recruiters are actually receiving the training they need. For example, the guidance did not give specific instructions on providing training on managing a major recruitment effort, such as the one required by the census, nor does the guidance discuss the need to highlight the important role the applicant file's recruiting sources report can play in monitoring and planning recruitment efforts.

The Bureau continues to believe that while headquarters has provided guidance, the regions, on the basis of their experience and knowledge of the local recruiting challenges their district offices will face, are in the best position to design their own recruitment training programs. We agree that a successful recruitment effort depends on local conditions and that the Bureau's regional offices are in the best position to design recruiter training programs. However, certain key recruiting skills, such as how to manage a major recruitment effort, need to be taught irrespective of the location of the district office. In addition, by not systematically reviewing regional training programs for 1989 activities, the Bureau identified weaknesses in district office recruiter training efforts after prec canvass had been completed.

Limited Oversight Contributed to Poor Recruitment Planning

The Bureau believes that planning is critical in designing recruiting strategies that address the diverse competitive challenges it faces. One of the Bureau's major achievements for the 1990 census cycle has been to begin recruitment efforts well in advance of the census. For example, the Bureau hired its 1990 regional recruiters about 2 years before the census; for the 1980 census regional recruiters were hired about 6 months before the census. The Bureau issued its 1990 national recruiting plan about 3 years before the census and a regional recruiting plan in December 1987. In contrast, there was not sufficient time to learn about local recruiting challenges in 1980. This affected the recruiters' ability to manage the region's recruiting efforts.

The Bureau's 1990 national and regional recruiting plans discussed the need for each region to develop specific regional and district office recruiting strategies on the basis of the demographic profile and recruiting challenges confronting its geographic area. For example, each area's ethnic and racial composition is a factor that must be considered in

designing a recruiting program to meet the key Bureau goal that communities be enumerated by individuals from their own neighborhoods. Unemployment rates must also be considered because they are an indication of how difficult recruiting may be.

Headquarters Did Limited Monitoring of Field Recruitment Planning

The Bureau provided guidance on the recruiting plans that the regions were instructed to develop for the district offices but did not subsequently assess those regional planning efforts. As a result, the Bureau did not know the extent to which the district offices were prepared for the recruitment challenges they face.

Our review of recruitment efforts in the Los Angeles and New York regions found that regional recruitment planning efforts for 1989 activities were limited. For example, the Los Angeles regional office did not develop recruiting plans for its district offices in 1989. The regional recruiter said that she believed existing Bureau guidance covered the subject adequately. We found, however, that the absence of a clear local recruiting plan can hamper recruitment efforts. According to the recruiter at one Los Angeles region district office, he inherited a disorganized recruitment program when the original recruiter left. He was not provided with a recruiting plan for the office and therefore experienced problems with his early recruitment efforts. For example, he had to reconstruct the office's list of recruiting contacts and evaluate the extent to which the office's locations for testing applicants were actually yielding candidates. According to the recruiter at another Los Angeles region district office, information on the ethnic composition of his area would have been helpful in monitoring the success of his recruitment efforts in generating applicants that reflect the ethnic profile of the community.

Recruiting strategies prepared by the New York regional office for its district offices were not tailored to address the specific recruiting challenges, such as the unemployment rates, each district office confronts. District offices in the New York region were provided with modifications to the headquarters' guidance to the regions on preparing recruiting plans and a list of organizations in their respective areas that had agreed to assist with census recruitment. The New York guidance noted the importance of planning the recruitment effort but provided limited direction on how it should be done.

Regional Improvements Planned but Headquarters Oversight Not Expanded

The need for strong recruitment planning in the district offices was a major topic of discussion during the Bureau's August 1989 recruiting conference. A well-designed recruitment strategy is especially important in overcoming the recruitment challenges posed by high-employment areas. Traditional recruitment strategies that focus on individuals who are actively seeking employment, such as contacts with state employment centers and classified advertising, will not necessarily be sufficient to attract applicants who are not in the labor market. For example, the New York region experienced significant recruiting difficulties during prec canvass in high-income areas.

A Bureau official said that applicants in high-employment areas are attracted to the census because it is a major federal undertaking rather than because it provides the opportunity for employment. Promoting census jobs by convincing applicants that working on the census is in the national interest is more difficult than using a recruiting approach that stresses job opportunities, according to this official.

Problems with the planning and execution of recruitment efforts in 1989 led the Bureau's regions to enhance planning efforts for the district offices. For example, the Charlotte region's October 1989 recruiting plan is based on a county-by-county evaluation of the recruiting strategies that were most successful and the recruiting problems that were experienced in 1989.

Bureau headquarters, however, is not pursuing a coordinated effort of reviewing the planning efforts the regions are doing for the district offices. Similar to the position it has taken on recruitment training, the Bureau believes that its regions know the recruitment challenges confronting the district offices and how best to design a recruitment program to address those challenges.

As a result, the Bureau does not have the assurance that the planning problems experienced with the 1989 prec canvass will not be replicated in the new district offices during the census. Bureau headquarters could review regional planning efforts for the district offices to assess whether these efforts address the problems identified after prec canvass, particularly the absence of a recruitment strategy in some cases and the failure to design recruiting efforts that address the economic and demographic recruiting issues confronting each office.

Well-trained district office recruiters and soundly designed local recruiting efforts are especially important for the actual census because the

opening of 349 new district offices nationwide for the census will significantly increase the regional offices' workload in guiding and monitoring recruiting performance in the district offices. While each region was responsible for overseeing recruiting activities in an average of 8 district offices in 1989, each will be responsible for an average of 35 offices in 1990. The increased regional workload for the census forces even greater reliance on the district office recruiters to manage their recruitment efforts effectively without extensive direct regional assistance.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The Bureau faces major challenges in attracting the staff it needs to complete the census. The Bureau has made significant progress during the 1990 census cycle in establishing a national recruitment program. In addition, recent actions, such as its implementation of geographic wage rates and legislation expanding the potential applicant pool, should further improve the Bureau's competitive posture. However, the Bureau needs to ensure that the district office recruiter training and planning efforts are adequately preparing the recruiters for the challenges they will face during the census.

Accordingly, we recommend that the Director, Bureau of the Census, direct headquarters staff to assume a more proactive role in monitoring the regions' management of field recruitment efforts by

- assuring that the recruiter training the regions are providing addresses the training needs identified during 1989, particularly in managing a recruitment effort; and
- reviewing the planning efforts the regions are establishing for their district offices and requiring any necessary corrective actions needed to ensure plans account for the diverse recruiting challenges the Bureau's district offices confront.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We obtained oral comments on a draft of this report from the Bureau. Bureau officials said they believed that the draft gave insufficient attention to the improvements that the Bureau has made in designing and implementing its recruitment program since 1980. The Bureau noted, for example, that it began planning the 1990 recruitment effort early in the decade, hired key regional and district office staff earlier in the census cycle than in 1980, gained valuable recruiting experience and contacts

from precensus field activities, and has held a number of conferences for regional staff to exchange ideas on recruiting.

The Bureau also said that the draft did not fully recognize the major differences between recruiting efforts for 1980; field activities during the 1990 census cycle, including prec canvass; and the 1990 census. For example, the Bureau believes that the piece-rate method of paying enumerators in 1980 contributed to staffing problems. The Bureau believes that hourly pay rates used during the 1990 census cycle along with the daily contact with supervisors should make it easier to recruit and retain employees. The Bureau also believes that its national network of district offices will enable it to better focus recruitment efforts at the local level.

The Bureau noted that other actions, taken since we completed our audit work, should further improve recruiting for the census. For example, at the request of the Bureau, the Department of Health and Human Services is allowing the states to request waivers from provisions that require recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children to have their benefits reduced if they work on the census.

Overall, the Bureau believes that it is in a much better position for the recruitment challenges posed by the 1990 census than at a similar point during the 1980 census. The Bureau noted that as of February 23, 1990, its 1990 qualified applicant base already was about 72.5 percent of what the Bureau's qualified applicant base was at the end of the 1980 census.

We agree that the Bureau is better prepared for the recruiting challenges it will face in 1990 than it was at a similar point in 1980. For example, as we noted in chapter 3, the Bureau's implementation of geographic wages for the 1990 census and its beginning recruitment planning and staffing earlier than in 1980, are major improvements over the 1980 census recruitment program. In addition, we noted that the Bureau's regions have applied valuable lessons learned from prec canvass, which were raised at the Bureau's August 1989 recruiting conference. These lessons subsequently were used to improve the selection and training of recruiters and strengthen local recruitment planning.

However, the Bureau's progress since 1980 does not mean that recruitment for the 1990 census will be without difficulty. The primary objectives of our work were to assess the Bureau's 1989 prec canvass recruiting progress and the adequacy of the preparations the Bureau

has undertaken to ensure that its district offices are ready to implement a recruitment program for the 1990 census. We found that Bureau headquarters needed to improve its oversight efforts to ensure that the regions are providing the district office recruiters with the training and recruitment planning support the recruiters need.

Recruiting a high-quality temporary workforce still is a major management challenge for the Bureau. Early 1990 recruiting performance demonstrates the scope of this challenge. For example, the Bureau did not meet its milestone to have achieved 50 percent of its 1990 recruiting goal by March 2, 1990. Overall, the Bureau met about 34 percent of its 1990 recruiting goal by that date. According to the Bureau, 84.6 percent of its district offices did not meet the 50 percent interim recruiting goal. Difficulties in meeting recruiting goals do not necessarily result in staff shortages. However, recruiting shortages provide an indication of how difficult attracting a sufficient number of staff may be when hiring actually begins. Meeting recruiting goals also is important in providing managers with flexibility in choosing the best applicants when making hiring decisions.

Regarding our recommendation that Bureau headquarters assure itself that the regions' recruiter training and planning programs are sufficient, the Bureau has directed each region to submit a sample district office recruiting plan and outlines and related materials used to provide the specialized recruiter training. Bureau officials said they will examine the material to ensure it addresses the problems identified in 1989. The Bureau also noted that headquarters officials continue to monitor district office recruiting performance by reviewing weekly management information system reports that show the extent to which each office is meeting recruiting goals. We believe that the Bureau's decision to systematically review regional recruiter training programs and recruitment plans addresses our recommendation.

The Bureau also suggested a number of technical clarifications, which we have made to the report where appropriate.

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